

REPORT of COUNTY COUNCILLOR for 2015/2016

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) has been rethinking provision of all services in response to unexpected reductions in its grant from central Government. Savings of £292 million per annum have already been made, but the grant was further reduced by £70 million between Dec 2015 / Feb 2016. A transition allowance of £4 million was allowed in time for the budget-setting Council on 16th Feb which will be used to ease the reductions in social services. OCC has increased its Council Tax by 1.99% plus 2% permitted specifically to meet the impact of Living Wage from April 2016, but the impact is severe and OCC now spends 50% of its revenue on 2% of the population (adult and children's social care.) The Council has decided to withdraw from providing services within the villages and all bus subsidies and negotiate with bus companies serving rural areas. Pot hole patching will continue as necessary and Gov has made special funds available.

OXFORDSHIRE TOGETHER : aims to agree formal arrangements with Town/Parish Councils to support them to develop their own grass-cutting, gritting and snow-clearance within the villages; OCC will continue to cut grass on the verges outside village (2 cuts per year) and to grit and snow-clear on major routes (mainly bus routes). Some villages are planning to provide this service also. By April 140 Town/Parish Councils have expressed interest and will now sign S.101 Local Agency Agreements for formal transfer to undertake highway services, initially for 3 years. It is promoted on basis of:

providing services according to local priorities, with local decision-making;
improved quality of service from more responsive service;
generating local employment opportunities;
'ownership' of local area;
increased satisfaction and pride in local area

OCC will continue to provide highway safety services.

BUS SUBSIDIES : OCC has withdrawn all bus subsidies from July, and is negotiating with the bus companies to re-route and consolidate services (possibly with school bus service) to keep open some connections for rural villages. Bus 66 is already commercially viable; Bus 67 will continue on A417 Wantage to Faringdon on developer funding, but there is currently no plan to serve villages along B4507. The schools service may be adapted.

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STANFORD TIP: is again reprieved until 2024! I am requesting that some developer money (S.106) be spent to improve the facility.

RESTRUCTURING LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN OXFORDSHIRE : Reduced Gov funding makes clear that local government must reorganise to better use the funding available. OCC report in 2014 showed that £25-£32 million is tied up in two-tier administration and a unitary authority is a better solution. In December, OCC and the health commissioner (OCCG) together applied for devolved powers and budgets, but Gov requires Unitary or an elected Mayor for devolved powers. There was a (long) pause

The Oxfordshire District Councils with Oxford City organised themselves to propose 4 District-based unitaries in February 2016 and have commissioned PWC to conduct a viability study, expecting a report by end of June.

The County Council has decided to conduct a separate study on the case for a single county-wide unitary, One Oxfordshire, which is still to be announced.

There are advantages in District-based unitaries : more local decision making reflecting local needs more closely (better roads and infrastructure and closer management of S.106 agreements!) but not clear how best to provide county-wide social services effectively and efficiently from 4 Districts with no experience of delivering these services currently.

A single One Oxfordshire structure with 650,000 residents currently, and expected to grow to about 850,000 by 2030, would be the biggest unitary in the country (currently Cornwall with 550,000 is the biggest.) That structure would have to provide for local input in the districts (esp. for planning decisions) and we await proposals after OCC's study.

I support the decision to get a separate OCC study. Despite the spend in very tight times, 'opposing' proposals will deliver best evidence of each proposal and better decisions will be made. This will be the new structure for Oxfordshire for the next generation- we must have best evidence to make it!

The decision lies with Secretary of State (Greg Clark at DCLG) who expects to have clear proposals to consider by the end of the year. I will keep you informed.

Cllr YVONNE CONSTANCE

25 April 2016

